

The Briefing



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Here I am, talking about Jesus just the same: Larry Norman at 60

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(Editor's note: Since this article was written, Larry Norman passed away on 24 February 2008.)

Larry Norman turned 60 in 2007, and with two biographies due to be released, it may be timely to reflect on the life of the person dubbed “the Father of Jesus Rock”. Mention of Larry Norman may draw a blank response from those under 40, although he influenced the thinking of contemporary artists like U2 and many of those working in Christian or Gospel music today. For those over 40, Norman’s name may bring back memories of the long blond hair, the controversial lyrics, and the question posed by the classic song, “Why should the devil have all the good music?”

Soul survivor

The more appropriate question for some baby boomers familiar with the albums *Upon This Rock* or *Only Visiting This Planet* might be “Whatever happened to Larry Norman?” There is no doubt that the biographies will reveal more detail, but Norman suffered a bi-polar trauma (where messages from the left and right hemispheres of his brain didn’t connect properly) after being struck on the head during a heavy aeroplane landing in 1978. This hindered him both creatively, and in the management of his record label and agency. Incidents with staff and disagreements with artists and distributors (which, Norman says, undermined the integrity of his ministry) led to him closing down his operation in America and moving to Europe for several years.

Norman did continue writing and performing during the 1980s, often using printed lyrics to help his unreliable memory—an aid widely used these days by performers. In 1988, Norman claims that he and his brother were poisoned while on tour in Russia. Just years after recovering from that incident, in 1992, Norman suffered the first of a series of major heart attacks that have gradually restricted his live performances. (His medical experiences present a strong case study for the benefit of the type of universal health care that exists in the UK and Australia.) In the past few years, his eyesight has also begun to deteriorate.

Recently, like an elder statesman releasing his memoirs, Norman has spent his time remastering and releasing a large number of retrospective albums and collectors' editions. Many of his rare concert appearances of the past few years are also available on DVD. These present a frank portrayal of his physical decline. They also reveal someone who is still ready to share his life with his audience, but who is, at times, irascible when the audience seem more interested in entertainment rather than exhortation.¹ ([#fi](#))

Norman's personal life has also been difficult. Apart from his debilitating illnesses, he has been through two divorces, and has experienced broken friendships with some fellow musicians. Norman has, nonetheless, raised the son from his second marriage, and, with the support of his family and friends, has continued to record when possible, run his Solid Rock label, and provide an insightful commentary on the relevance of the gospel to life in the 21st century. Norman's faithfulness through these various trials should be an encouragement to us Christians. However, the apparently troubled nature of his life has fuelled speculation about his faith—already rife because of his music. Moreover, his apparent reluctance to be identified with the established church has also created doubt about his place as spokesman for Christianity. The complex imagery in his songs, his interpretation of some Biblical themes, and the difficulty in determining when Norman is speaking from personal experience—especially in songs about loneliness, despair and doubt—have only served to support the criticism of Norman from some quarters.

In retrospect, it is sometimes easier to see the veracity in Norman's observations about the priorities of some churches, the consistency of his vision and ministry, and his faithful obedience to and proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, no matter what the circumstances. It is Norman's role as an evangelist, exhorter, encourager and sometime troublemaker that this article seeks to explore.

Righteous rocker

In the 1975 manifesto for his label, Solid Rock, Norman summarized what he saw as the relationship between contemporary musical styles and the gospel. 30 years later, many of the observations retain their potency:

Music has become the second language of the youth. It has the power to lead or mislead. Just as it once influenced the misdirection of youth into drugs and campus revolution, it can be (and is being) used to proclaim in a modern tongue a message that is almost 2,000 years old.

Today, Christian writers ... are redefining the cultural context of Christian music and often find themselves facing the same resistance that Luther, Watts, Booth, and others have had to face. Innovation and creative direction are not always appreciated, because they are both often misunderstood. But the critics of modern Christian music should keep in mind that today's young Christians may be writing the hymns of tomorrow.² [\(#f2\)](#)

One of the problems for the church establishment was that Norman did not seem to be writing hymns. Not only was the music rock, the words were full of strange images or open references to subjects such as sex and drugs, and he often failed to “name the name” of Jesus. In understanding the reasons for this, it becomes easier to see that Norman was using principles that are still important for Christians today.

Norman is one who saw the society around him in the USA not as a bastion of Christian morality, nor as an enemy to be shunned, but as a cross-cultural mission field. The use of Jesus' command “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15), and the image of the ‘agape’ mouth containing the cross of Calvary on his record sleeves make this clear. Like all those who are serious about mission, he tested God's call, prepared through Bible study and prayer, made sure that he understood the gospel, and chose to speak in a language that would be understood by those he sought to reach in Jesus' name. Norman displayed a sympathetic understanding of that unchurched culture, but an equally strong desire not to compromise the integrity of the gospel.

Why don't you look into Jesus?

Many of his songs were written during a period of street evangelism firstly around his home neighbourhood of Haight-Ashbury, which had become synonymous with California's hippie and drug culture, and later along Hollywood Boulevard in the heart of Los Angeles. Norman's songs often contain a series of self-contained vignettes that (he hoped) would give the passers-by something to think about, or that might hook them in to hear more of the gospel message. The audience for these songs was not those already saved, it was those to whom church was a foreign language. He understood the ability of music to get behind people's gates, to draw them in with a beautiful melody and good words, to make people drop their defensive position to the gospel—even if for a short time—and allow God to speak to them in that moment.

Norman recognized the gospel music roots of rock 'n roll. His family attended a church in the poor, black neighbourhood of San Francisco where they lived. He understood that the power of rock music came from its gospel roots; he was merely reclaiming it for Jesus. He also understood the search for meaning that was being undertaken by the musicians and their audience through both the music and the attendant lifestyle. Steve Turner highlights Norman's understanding of the search for redemption in the rock context. He notes that Norman's trilogy of albums from the 1970s unfold the story of redemption from Fall (*So Long Ago the Garden*) through this life (*Only Visiting This Planet*) to paradise (*In Another Land*).³ [\(#f3\)](#)

Jim Peterson, in his book *Church Without Walls*, defines the role of God's people as being Christ's witnesses to the world; living among our unbelieving neighbours, serving them, revealing Christ to them; and using whatever we have to serve God by serving our brothers and sisters and the unbeliever. Peterson later outlines what he sees as the requirements for mission: rapport, comprehension, relevance to life and "colaborship [sic]" (or encouraging the hearers to tell others).⁴ ([#f4](#)). Norman's songs sought to have a relevance to life on the street, establishing a rapport with the musical and social culture around him, and leading his listeners to look to Jesus for the answers in their search for meaning.

Norman's attitude, like that of Cliff Richard, is that if you're a Christian, every part of your life is given in obedience to God:

Every song, whether it mentions love, if it mentions sex, if it mentions culture, politics, drugs, anything, it's a Christian song if you're letting what you know about Jesus really come through. You don't have to relate it to Scripture or anything, but your attitude should be coloured. God should have blinded you to your original vision and given you a view through Christ and now everything you think or do is a Christian act, a Christian thought.⁵ ([#f5](#)).

This brings us to another aspect of Norman's stage performance: his humour. Years before Adrian Plass, Norman was using humour to highlight the unseen obstacle that church culture can be to believers and non-believers alike. He used humour in the same way as his music—to break down barriers and encourage people to think critically about their own attitudes and beliefs.

Weight of the world

A heart for the gospel together with a desire for people to hear the gospel forms the foundation of Norman's ministry. In obedience to Jesus' commands, he seeks to reach out and show God's love to the poor and the marginalized. The teaching of the church about issues such as homosexuality and abortion is often interpreted as hatred by those involved in these practices. Norman doesn't condone these practices but seeks to demonstrate God's love in the way he addresses these people.

He is well aware of the sin of bitterness towards those who dilute or pervert the true message of salvation with wrong priorities, liberal theology and sinful actions. His desire to demonstrate God's love leads him to repent of the anger he may feel against such people. He seeks to remain obedient to the Lord through Bible study, prayer and being open to the leading of the Spirit. However, his desire to be faithful to the Bible's teaching also leads him to speak openly of the hypocrisy he observed in institutional churches and, decades before Bono, to offer commentary on political and world issues such as injustice, racism and poverty.

I am a servant

For someone working in an industry that is built on ego and image, his constant exhortation to die daily to self—to remain close to Christ and to allow him to lead you in every aspect of your life—is confronting. His uneasy relationship with both the secular and Christian music industries is testament to his desire to follow God rather than chase popular chart success or build a financially successful career. Even his audiences have found his demeanour disconcerting at times. There was the concern that Norman didn't smile on stage, or that he spent too much time talking to his audience rather than singing. Then there were the times when he would stop altogether, seeking God's direction about which song to sing, what message to give, and how that message should be told—gently or firmly:

Now on stage a lot of times I'm quiet and people come back stage and ask me, "What was the matter? How come you're so quiet?" ... I'm listening—that's why. I want to know what to do. I'm not waiting for a big sign or a finger to come down and point to people who aren't saved—I'm just listening. I'm listening for my own voice to stop and for God's to become more clear, because I certainly have a lot of ideas of my own, but I don't trust my own ideas.⁶ [\(#f6\)](#)

For someone who has spent most of his life championing the claim of those involved in music ministry to spiritual and financial support from fellow believers (1 Cor 9:3-12, 1 Tim 5:17-18), speaking against bootlegging, internet downloads and other forms of music piracy, it is perhaps surprising that Norman is critical of the modern Praise and Worship movement and the operation of CCLI. The modern hymn writers he was at pains to shield from criticism some 30 years ago are now being questioned by Norman for becoming part of a multi-national Praise and Worship industry, producing manufactured rather than genuine praise. This criticism is, perhaps, even more confusing when it is known that the Vineyard Church, one of the leaders in Praise and Worship music, is said to have begun as a Bible Study at Norman's house. Norman asks why a song written as an act of worship should remain the lucrative copyright property of the composer and not the property of the one to whom it is being offered—God:

God doesn't charge us a fee to worship Him. Isn't it enough that the publisher and writer make money from the CD sales? Do they also have to be paid every time a congregation sings their song? They also get paid for the sheet music which choirs use to memorize their compositions. Isn't that enough money?⁷ [\(#f7\)](#)

On the other hand, this may be seen as further evidence of Norman's long-standing criticism of the commercialization of the gospel music industry. Perhaps what this issue does is to highlight the single driving motivation in Norman's life to surrender all in obedience to Christ. He, like the first disciples, has willingly given up everything to follow Jesus (Matt 19:27-30). At one point in the 1960s, he not only gave up a successful music career, he gave up music altogether as a sacrifice to God, feeling that his street preaching was more effective than his musical performances. It took what he considered a very clear leading from God to bring him back to music, but it was music that would be uncompromising in its desire to offer to God excellence, and uncompromising in its proclamation of the gospel of hope, grace and love. During his many years of illness, while his friends have asked for help with his medical expenses, Norman has preferred to ask people to give their money to the poor. His support of Compassion International, the Calcutta Mission,

Romanian Orphans and other organizations such as Christian Community Placement Centre show his desire share the love of Christ through incarnation, as much as information—in other words, to proclaim the gospel through his life as much as through his words.

All the way home

It is as a faithful servant, prepared to preach the word in and out of season, correcting, rebuking and encouraging with great patience, doing the work of an evangelist, enduring hardship and speaking the truth, that Norman should be viewed. Presently he, like Paul, can say, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim 4:6-7). Or, as Norman puts it, “Soon I’ll be going home. I don’t know when but I believe I’m ready.”⁸ [\(#f8\)](#)

Endnotes

¹ [\(#r1\)](#) Although over a decade old, the acoustic performance on *Larry Norman: Alive and Kicking* is the pick of those presently available. *Larry Norman: Live at Seaside* has Larry with a band, is good alternative for those who like their music electrified.

² [\(#r2\)](#) Larry Norman, *The Story of Solid Rock*, 1975.

³ [\(#r3\)](#) Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven: Rock and Roll and the Search for Redemption*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1995, p. 169.

⁴ [\(#r4\)](#) Jim Peterson, *Church Without Walls*, Navpress, Colorado, 1992, pp.61, 208-209.

⁵ [\(#r5\)](#) Larry Norman speaking at a Christian Music Seminar in Sydney, 1976.

⁶ [\(#r6\)](#) Ibid.

⁷ [\(#r7\)](#) www.larrynorman.com (<http://www.larrynorman.com>).

⁸ [\(#r8\)](#) Liner Notes, *Sessions* CD, Solid Rock SRD-222, 2004.

